THE FOOL, THE ATHEIST AND THE SPIRITUAL

Nobel-winning playwright Dario Fo will be visiting Malta to exhibit some of his latest theatrical and visual work at this year's Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale. **Johnathan Mallia** speaks to artistic director **Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci** about the intricacies of inviting an atheist to put up an exhibition about St Francis of Assisi.

I am the jongleur. I leap and pirouette and make you laugh. I make fun of those in power and I show you how puffed up and conceited the big shots are who go around making wars in which we are the ones who get slaughtered. I reveal them for what they are. I pull out the plug, and... pssss... they deflate.

A jongleur he may claim to be, but Dario Fo is more than the itinerant medieval entertainer he says he is. The modern master of the Italian *commedia dell'arte,* the Italian playwright has acted, written, directed, sung in and stage designed countless theatrical pieces since the post-war era.

With his knack for tackling thorny topics like anarchism, religion, corruption or kidnapping with infectious joy, striking wit and a dash of irony, his works have been translated into over 30 languages and been experienced all over the world in myriad forms.

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Thomas Merton

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He is considered one of the most widely performed playwrights in modern theatre. But he is not your straightforward playwright.

He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1997, where the Swedish academy said he "emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden".

His response was to stage what critics termed "undoubtedly the most flamboyantly theatrical and comical acceptance speech ever seen at the Swedish Academy".

Previous to that, he and his wife Franca Rame were banned from entering the US in the 1980s by the Reagan administration, after being accused of supporting terrorism ostensibly due to their affiliation with the *Succorso Rosso*, a pre-war workers' rights group.

One of his most widely seen and produced works globally is the infamous *Mistero Buffo*, a comedy that centres around religious themes. Seen by over 40 million people worldwide, it was lambasted by the Vatican as "the most blasphemous show in the history of television".

Critics, however, called it a "brilliant recreation of the irreverent vitality of the popular medieval style of theatre."

At an age where most people would have retired from whatever line of work they are in, Fo had run for Mayor of Milan, garnering 23.4 per cent of the vote in the primary election of centre-left The Union, coming second to a former police chief. And that was 10 years ago.

> His works have been translated into over 30 languages, as well as being experience all over the world in myriad forms

This year, at the age of 89, apart from releasing his first novel *The Pope's Daughter*, (about the life of Lucrezia Borgia), he has once again hit headlines with his comments on the plight of migrants, referring to them as "an invented enemy", "men who arrive, desperate already and who are then enslaved in the proper sense of the term".

During his visit to Malta, Fo will be exhibiting some of his latest theatrical and visual work at the *Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale*.

"The theme for this year's edition is Christianity, Spirituality and the Other. Dario's works fit in excellently. His radicalism is in his spirituality, so he had no problems accepting our invitation to take part in the biennale," says artistic director Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci.

A senior lecturer of history of art at the University of Malta, besides being an artist and art theorist, Giuseppe has known and worked with Fo for over two decades.

"I got to know Dario from my studies at the Milano State University, when I was also organising the beginnings of the Theatre Studies Programme at the University of Malta. I got to know him through sheer hard-headedness. That is, by keeping on trying to contact him about some projects I had running, until I finally got through," he says.

"My theatre philosophy was quite similar to what Dario is known for: *commedia dell'arte* principles, improvisation, political commitments, public participation, roots, anti-establishment, radical and revolutionary.

"This is what had led to me to translate, adapt and produce his *Mistero Buffo* in Malta. In a similar and very modest manner I tried to integrate Maltese roots through *għana*-troubadour culture, within the classical theatre. Together with il-Budaj, Karmenu l-Baħri and others we toured Malta with an *għana*-based interpretation of *Mistero Buffo*."

Giuseppe's familiarity with Fo's work made him an easy pick to suit the theme of this year's biennale relaunch.

Having evolved from the earlier Christian and sacred art-specific editions, this year the *biennale* explores the interrelationship between spirituality and religious belief, with a focus on the Other.

This refers to spirituality that is not confined to the standard dogmatic organisation of spirituality, but also includes the tension that comes with doubt, non-belief and the struggle to define one's own